DEQ to step up monitoring

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BATON ROUGE — The Department of Environmental Quality will step up air quality monitoring next year and be able to rapidly pinpoint offenders, says DEQ Secretary Paul Templet.

If approved in the Legislative session that starts April 17, DEQ's budget will increase $4.4 million over the present year's budget but Deputy Secretary Joel Lindsey says it's "relatively a standstill."

Two years ago, DEQ received no state funds and existed on fee assessments. In this year's proposed budget, about $20.5 million will be generated by fees and $5.6 million will be allocated from the state general fund. Coupled with $12.8 in federal funds, $12.5 from a federally sponsored loan program and $2 million from the motor fuels trust fund, DEQ will have a total budget of $53.5 million.

Templet said the increase will be dedicated primarily to new employees who will be able to investigate the many complaints received by his office. He is asking for 121 more employees, whose salaries total $4.95 million.

Understaffing has led to the department being unable to keep proper watch in many areas, Templet said.

DEQ is currently installing air quality samplers which will determine types of specific odors so a quicker decision can be made as to whether emissions are hazardous. Many of the reports received by the department are for odors that are objectionable but not hazardous.

Lindsey said DEQ is requesting $6.2 million in additional state funds to be used primarily to establish environmental management programs in parishes statewide. About $3.5 million would be spent to hire environmental coordinators to work with parish governments on environmental matters, "such as siting of parish landfills, which is vital in the Lafayette area," Lindsey said.

"Parishes need to concentrate on environmental problems before they reach the crucial stage," he said.

Coupled with the $6.2 million additional request, DEQ wants to impose $1.1 million in additional fees to be used for developing standards for disposal of infectious waste, nuclear waste (including radioactive oilfield pipe) and asbestos removal.

The Legislative Fiscal Office said the department will have a $25 million surplus this year. However, $15 million of that is federal money to be put into loans available to municipalities for improving sewerage treatment plants.

Lindsey said the remaining $10 million is surplus because DEQ was unable to fill positions allocated through the federal Superfund and nuclear waste grant programs, so the projects were not completed.